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AUTHOR	Wrigley, Heide Spruck
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ABSTRACT

Promising practices in the adult English-as-a-Second-Language literacy field that were observed by researchers during site visits are described in this digest. These innovative programs provide a social context for literacy, allow learning through hands on experience, and use learner-generated materials. Some programs may use the native language as a bridge to English. Native language literacy programs have been used successfully in regions where non-literate learners share a common language. Most innovative programs put a primary focus on communication and a secondary focus on error correction. Many programs try to set aside time for discussion of language issues, including explanations of the patterns and structure of English. One promising approach for linking language awareness with meaning-based literacy is a process approach in which learners focus on meaning during the "creative stages" of writing (brainstorming ideas, class discussions, developing drafts) and on form during the revising and editing stages. Video applications also show great promise in literacy education. By providing a visual context for ideas, video communicates ideas independent of print. Although they differ in their specific approaches to language teaching and literacy development, innovative programs have one thing in common: Practitioner have found ways of helping learners to access literacy and use it in ways that are meaningful to them. (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education) (LET)

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National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education

INNOVATIVE PROGRAMS AND PROMISING PRACTICES IN ADULT ESL LITERACY

By Heide Spruck Wrigley
Aguirre International, San Mateo, CA

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Innovative Programs and Promising Practices in Adult ESL Literacy

by Heide Spruck Wrigley
Aguirre International, San Mateo, CA

Adult ESL literacy is a relatively new field that holds great promise for language and literacy teaching. Combining ideas from applied linguistics, anthropology, and cognitive science, the field reflects many of the recent shifts that have taken place in second language teaching and adult literacy education. These shifts include a greater emphasis on communication and "meaning making," consideration of the ways language and literacy are used in various social contexts, and greater use of the learners' native language in teaching initial literacy.

These are some of the findings of a national study funded under the National English Literacy Demonstration Program for Adults of Limited English Proficiency. Conducted by Aguirre International, the study involved an extensive review of the literature, an examination of 123 descriptions of ESL literacy programs, and site visits to 9 project sites (Guth & Wrigley, 1992). This digest describes some of the promising practices in the ESL literacy field that were observed at the sites visited by the researchers. There are a great many other programs that also serve ESL literacy students in innovative ways.

Innovative adult ESL literacy programs serve nontraditional students in nontraditional ways. Using practices supported by cognitive theory and research in second language acquisition, they promote second language acquisition as a process of meaning making that links the experience of the learner to culture, language, literacy, and learning. These programs are still the exception. In many programs, literacy is taught as a set of skills, isolated from the personal experience of the learners and the social issues that inform their lives. Learners are expected to start with the letters of the alphabet, progress to syllables, then to words, and then create sentences made up of those words. Innovative programs, in keeping with a communicative and social/contextual approach (see Street, 1984 and Auerbach, 1992), tend to follow another path: They adapt approaches that introduce print in meaningful units (such as the names of the learners, their children, and their countries) and invite learners to tell about their lives. To help contextualize ideas, initial print is supported by pictures from magazines, family photographs, and pictures drawn by learners. By starting with the images, concepts, words, and expressions that are familiar to the learners, rather than with the alphabet, innovative programs provide opportunities for "meaning making" from the first day of literacy education. The following sections describe ways that ESL literacy programs bring literacy to life.

Providing a Social Context for Literacy Education

Practitioners in innovative adult ESL programs realize that literacy education is most effective if it is tied to the lives of the learners and reflects their experiences as community members, parents, and participants in the workforce. To show how literacy can help adults understand and deal with social issues, some programs have set up community research projects that involve learners in collecting and analyzing data and interpreting their findings. At El Barrio Popular Education Program in New York, a bilingual program, Spanish-English participants canvassed several streets in their neighborhood, counted the number of stores displaying bilingual signs, and interviewed the merchants to find out what language was used in their interactions with customers. Back in the classrooms, learners developed charts based on the information gathered. Their findings show how English and Spanish are used in commercial interactions in their East Harlem neighborhood. By using the community as a context for literacy, the program shows learners how to access, interpret, analyze, and synthesize information in ways that connect school-based learning with personal knowledge and community experience.

Learning Through Hands-on Experience

ESL teachers have long known that linking verbal and nonverbal communication is an effective way of introducing English to non-literate adults. To that end, many innovative teachers provide learners with the opportunity to participate in hands-on learning tasks that initially do not require literacy. For example, in many competency-based programs, such literacy activities may involve food. A group of learners might make fruit salad, using bananas, mangos, and papayas. Later, they might "write up" the recipe, using drawings to illustrate the process. As learners get more proficient at forming letters, they add the names of the fruits they used to the visual description. At the Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) in Virginia, learners interview each other about their favorite foods, fill out grids that show the results of these in-class surveys, and report results back to the group. As they become more proficient at reading and writing, participants might make instant pudding, following instructions written on large signs, and conduct taste tests where they rate flavors and fill out food preference charts.

In the Illinois Workplace Literacy Project, learners use work-related pictures, Total Physical Response activities, and flash cards to develop the vocabulary and sentence structures needed on the job. The women in the program are garment workers who speak very little English but have some literacy skills in their mother tongue. By participating in tasks that are not dependent on print, adults with few literacy skills can learn job-related competencies.

Using Learner-Generated Materials

Creating a community of learners where all individuals are respected and all voices are heard is often difficult in multi-level classrooms in which some learners read and write while others do not. Many teachers have found that stories written by other students can bring learners together around the shared opportuni-

ties of reading, talking, and writing about personal experiences or community concerns. A learner-centered approach to reading and writing has also been used successfully in programs where native speakers learn side by side with immigrants, as is the case at the UAW/Chrysler workplace program in Ypsilanti, Michigan.

The Refugee Women's Alliance in Seattle publishes learner stories that contain the women's remembrances of family celebrations, childhood memories, special events, and special places. Illustrated by the women, these stories are bound together with a bright cover, and shared with the community. Learner-generated stories have the ring of authenticity and the strong sense of voice that textbook stories often lack. Using learner-generated themes as a basis for discussion and literacy development also helps beginners to see that their ideas count as much as the ideas of those who are more proficient. (See Peyton, 1991, for discussion.)

Using the Native Language as a Bridge to English

Some practitioners have found that introducing literacy in the native language can serve as a bridge to ESL literacy. Native language literacy approaches have been used successfully in regions where non-literate learners share a common language, including Massachusetts (where the Haitian Multi-Service Center teaches literacy in Haitian Creole), Minnesota (the Lao Family Community uses Hmong), California (City College of San Francisco uses Spanish), and New York (El Barrio Popular uses Spanish). In many cases, native language literacy is the best approach for non-literate learners who have had few years of education, are unsure about their own ability to learn in a school setting, and speak little English (see Rivera, 1990; Spener, in press).

The Lao Family Community of Minnesota uses English and Hmong to link the home culture of the learners with the mainstream community. In the family literacy component, both languages are used in the beginning classes to strengthen the role of the Hmong parents and increase their understanding of the local school system. Stories from Hmong culture and materials from the schools the children attend are used to build literacy in the two languages. To build background knowledge of U.S. laws and conventions in a way that is culturally congruent with Hmong values and traditions, speakers from community agencies work together with program staff to develop presentations on sensitive subjects such as child immunization, state marriage laws, and hunting laws.

Linking Communicative Competence and Language Awareness

To achieve a balance between language fluency and accuracy, most innovative programs put a primary focus on communication and a secondary focus on error correction. Many try to set aside time for discussion of language issues, including explanations of the patterns and structure of English. Yet they are careful not to let discussions of phonics, spelling, or grammar interfere with communication and the exchange of ideas. (See Wrigley & Guth, 1992, for discussion.) One promising approach for linking language awareness with meaning-based literacy is a process approach in which learners focus on meaning during the "creative stages" of writing (brainstorming ideas, class discussions, developing drafts) and on form during the revising and editing stages.

At the International Institute of Rhode Island, learners work in small groups to develop stories based on sets of pictures distributed by the teacher. As a group develops ideas, one member takes notes. The group then composes the story on newsprint. One learner acts as a scribe and checks spelling and word choices with the group before committing them to paper. Another group member then reads the story aloud in front of the class, using the pictures to illustrate points. After discussions about the story have been completed, participants respond to the language used in the piece, asking questions to clarify meaning or making suggestions for improvement.

Using Technology

Video applications show great promise in literacy education. By providing a visual context for ideas, video communicates ideas independent of print. As learners progress, videos can be used to show the connection between visual and printed information. El Paso Community College, in partnership with Levi Strauss, has developed a workplace literacy program centered around videos shot at local garment manufacturing plants. The videos provide learners with a visual context for workplace themes (worker safety or the impact of new technology) and provide significant oral language input. Interspersed throughout are interviews with actual garment workers. After watching the video, learners read a short piece, discuss the topic from their own perspectives, and write a passage about their personal experience.

Conclusion

Although they differ in their specific approaches to language teaching and literacy development, innovative programs have one thing in common: Practitioners have found ways of helping learners to access literacy and use it in ways that are meaningful to them. Focusing on meaning and communication and using grammar and phonics as tools, not as ends in themselves, learners and teachers are leading the way toward learner-focused teaching for adults who are new to literacy and new to English.

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